

When Your Adolescent Is In Trouble

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Despite a parent's best efforts, some young people find themselves in trouble with the law. Peer pressure, the need to assert independence, or misjudgments can place your adolescent at risk of involvement in activities that result in arrest and processing through the local juvenile justice system.

Juvenile justice systems vary widely between communities. If your child becomes involved in the juvenile justice system, your first step is to learn how the system in your area works. This knowledge will allow you to advocate for an outcome that teaches your child about the results of inappropriate behavior without hurting his or her prospects for the future.

Begin by asking the processing officer at the police station (usually an officer in the juvenile division) to explain the process to you:

- Why was my child arrested?
- Will you have to detain my child or can he or she be released in my custody? Will we need to post bond?
- Will my child have a record simply as a result of the arrest?
- What happens next?
- Whom should I speak with to get assistance if my child is referred to juvenile court?

In many cases, particularly for minor offenses or a first-time arrest, youth will be released into their parent's custody. They also may be diverted into a community service program where they will be expected to perform volunteer service. In exchange, the charges against them will be dropped.

If your child is referred to juvenile court, however, what happens next will depend on the structure of the local system, the actions of the prosecutor's office, and the availability of diversion or treatment programs. The prosecutor and juvenile court staff can tell you what to expect from the process. (Juvenile court staff include intake or probation department staff who often conduct preliminary investigations. These investigations provide juvenile court judges with background information they use to decide on dispositions.)

You also are well advised to seek legal counsel if your child is referred to the court system. Youth of families without financial resources can request counsel from the local

public defender's office. Even if you obtain a lawyer to represent your child, you should accompany your teen through all juvenile justice system processing: intake, meetings with juvenile court staff and diversionary or treatment program staff, and any court hearings.

Keep in mind that the main intent of most juvenile justice systems is to help young people redirect their lives, not simply to punish them. Still, your role in advocating for your child is crucial. There are several alternatives to a court hearing, court decision, or detention. Your child can be diverted, for example, into a treatment program. Further, when a court hearing and decision are required, courts usually view a parent's involvement in the case positively when making a decision.

Further, it often is in times of crisis that bonds between parents and adolescents are reaffirmed. At those times, youth again turn to their parents for support and protection. Troubling circumstances may present parents of adolescents with opportunities to show their love and support, to help their child obtain services to deal with specific problems, and to strengthen interpersonal connections that will benefit the family for years to come.